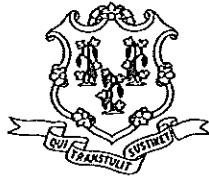


State of Connecticut

GENERAL ASSEMBLY



COMMISSION ON CHILDREN

Testimony of Elaine Zimmerman
Executive Director, Connecticut Commission on Children
Hartford, Connecticut
Testimony Before the Education Committee

Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleischmann and Members of the Committee:

My name is Elaine Zimmerman. I am the Executive Director of the Connecticut Commission on Children. I am here today to speak on behalf of Raised Bill 112, An Act Providing Child Care for Assistance Recipients enrolled in approved higher education programs.

This bill addresses a component of the opportunity gap for poor families, helping them move up a ladder by providing necessary child care while they improve their educational experience. There is truly nothing more important to the economy and our future than to help children thrive and parents succeed in work.

Yet, poor parents have largely not had a chance to complete their schooling. Each year of education, the research shows us, increases their critical thinking, expands choice and opportunity and increases wages significantly.

Family Literacy

There is a high correlation between the literacy level of the mother and the literacy level of the child. Yet we know that the literacy levels of moms coming off of TANF are very low.

Many TANF recipients are getting jobs and then being laid off, because they can read at a third grade level, but they cannot read manuals. So they get a job with the post office and then they are fired; they get a great job with U.P.S. and then they are laid off. We are losing workers constantly due to adult literacy gaps.

We need to help our poorest families be educated and our youngest children benefit from literate and inspired parents. A two generational framework, where we meet the needs of both the parent and the child, offers an efficacy and improved outcomes.

Redefining How We Use Our Existing Dollars

What we offer parents in hope and opportunity is what the children will also see as their opportunity. If a parent can go to school, with the necessary child care, then school is important to the child as well. If the parent cannot progress, the child has no image of a staircase to climb.

Children who grow up in poverty are up to three times more likely to die during childhood. They are more likely to lack housing, adequate food, and receive lower scores in math and reading than their peers who are not poor. This costs us more than the cost of child care or the cost of a parent going to school for one or two years to acquire technical skills.

Every year a child spends in poverty costs society \$11,800 in lost future productivity. TANF dollars can help pay for child care while parents go to school. A simple transfer to the CCDBG line, is permissible. This would expand the resources in a very tough time so that poor parents could move out of poverty and into opportunity.

But our history in TANF dollars is one of habit, not boldness. We moved significant TANF dollars to address a court case over two decades ago. But we never changed our steps or expectations. What needed to occur to address an urgency, became the norm.

This steady habit has not allowed us to ask, in an intentional way, how do we aggregate our TANF dollars to optimally reduce poverty? How do we help poor families get education and job skills? As a results-based accountability state, we are not applying RBA practices to our TANF prioritizations.

In TANF reporting, there is a category called 'other' which captures use of funds that are beyond items such as employment, training or childcare. In Connecticut, our "other" spending is at 38.6% for FY 14 (which is about the same as 2013 and is still quite a bit higher than the national average of 14.7%.)

Connecticut spends nearly 40 million TANF dollars in DCF investigative services and over 47 million in case management. Surely investigative services and case management are critical to children at risk of abuse or who are abused. But money for poverty reduction strategies is not the same as child abuse reduction.

What the Research Tells Us

In a study that our state led asking how to reduce family poverty, national poverty experts, across party affiliation, offered recommendations in the areas of family income and earning potential, education, income safety and family support. Experts included Mark Greenberg, now the Deputy Secretary for the Administration of Children and Families, and Ron Haskins at the Brookings Institute. Their recommendations were then prioritized by the Urban Institute in an economic model analysis.

They guided us with five major policy recommendations. Interestingly, the first two are components of the legislation in Raised Bill 112. They urged us to provide early care access to poor families and to help poor parents get educated with high school degrees, GED's and associates degrees.

Pitting Empty Against Half Full

There are many who would say we do not have the resources now, even if this all made sense to provide child care to poor families seeking to be educated to climb out of chronic poverty. Care4Kids is currently part of a resource debate regarding who should have access to care, the most despondent, the near despondent or the low-income working worried family. Instead of pitting one against the other, why not use a federal resource to fund more than one cohort?

Lack of access to early care widens the achievement gap for those who are poor and minority before they open the kindergarten door. The children miss out on quality early learning, and the parents are not able to go to school and improve their lot in life.

Dyslexia and Early Literacy

The Commission on Children also supports SB 317. Best practices in dyslexia assessment and intervention align with our early literacy work. In fact, preservice programs which focus on the foundations of reading instruction must include proven dyslexia assessment and intervention strategies. We would like to see all curriculum align with evidence based structured literacy and not just the Dyslexia content. Also, as this approach is about the science of teaching reading, "a course" is not sufficient to meet the requirements to prepare a teacher to support students with Dyslexia.